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FEATURE

A love letter to Ravi Shankar

Chicago's South Asia Institute celebrates the famed sitarist with the "Ragamala to Rockstar" exhibit and must-see films.

By KATHLEEN SACHS

“What Andrés Segovia is to the guitar, what Pablo Casals is to the cello, so Ravi Shankar is to the sitar. The master. The one who you might say revolutionized the instrument.” This is how Chicago legend Studs Terkel began a 1983 radio broadcast on which Shankar appeared. Among other subjects, the two luminaries of their respective crafts discussed Richard Attenborough’s 1982 film *Gandhi*, for which Shankar and George Fenton composed the

music and received an Academy Award nomination for Best Original Score (they lost to John Williams, however, for *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*).

Film lovers are likely familiar with Shankar owing to his collaborations with directors such as Attenborough and Indian masters Satyajit Ray (Shankar composed the music for the Apu Trilogy) and Mrinal Sen (*Genesis*), and, less auteur-adjacent, for composing the scores to Conrad Rooks’s cult classic *Chap-*

paqua and Ralph Nelson’s *Charly*.

An exhibition at the South Asia Institute—which opened in late 2019, just several months before the start of the pandemic, and is, per its mission, dedicated to cultivating the art and culture of South Asia and its diaspora—features framed record sleeves for soundtrack albums to these and other films that Shankar scored. Titled “Ravi Shankar: Ragamala to Rockstar,” the exhibition includes many more artifacts of said rockstar’s life and career,

helping shed new light on Shankar for those both familiar and unfamiliar with this virtuoso of North Indian classical music, once dubbed “the godfather of world music” by Beatle and friend George Harrison.

“He was a giant,” echoes Afzal Ahmad, president and cofounder of the South Asia Institute. “[Shankar] worked with different well-known artists, [like] the Beatles . . . He’s got a very wide appeal. Very well-recognized. A very well-respected person. He was one of



those guys who built bridges to interact with other people. But he never really changed his style of playing. He kept it very pure. It was [a] northern Indian, Hindustani-style playing."

Ahmad cofounded the South Asia Institute with his wife, Shireen, who serves as the organization's vice president. Much of the artwork currently on display on the building's second floor is from the couple's personal collection. The masterful canvases, which range in style from traditional to avant-garde, provide an interesting backdrop for events held in this part of the Institute.

A few weeks ago I had the pleasure of attending a concert there, by Grammy-nominated sitar player Gaurav Mazumdar, a protege of Shankar's. Mazumdar (who lived with his guru for several years) performed an array of ragas, with Hindole Majumdar accompanying him on the tabla (hand drums). Ragas themselves

are as beguiling as they are sublime: The *Encyclopædia Britannica* defines them as a "melodic framework," but in the aforementioned interview with Terkel, Shankar expanded on this definition, saying, "We specifically use the word raga for the melody forms we have. It's very hard to explain, exactly, a raga. It's not a scale, and it's not just a key or a melody or a song. But it is something which is very precise."

This was the sixth of several events in support of the exhibition. For the opening in November, Shankar's wife, Sukanya, appeared in conversation with Mazumdar and another of the exhibition's curators, Brian Keigher, who's also a friend of the Shankar family. (Some of whom are stars in their own right: The Shankar's daughter, Anoushka, followed in her father's footsteps and became a sitarist, and the singer Norah Jones is her half sister from

Ravi Shankar  FRANCESCO SCAVULLO

one of Shankar's previous relationships.)

Just as Shankar provided the music for several films, several films have been made about the music legend. Four of these have screened as part of the exhibition programming: Howard Worth's 1971 documentary, *Raga: A Journey into the Soul of India* (narrated by Shankar and originally released by the filmmaking subsidiary of the Beatles' Apple Records); two relatively short works, Alan Kozlowski's *Sangeet Ratna* (2013) and Stuart Cooper's 1974 concert film *Ravi Shankar's Music Festival from India*; and Kozlowski's *Tenth Decade: Live in Escandido*, another concert film recorded in 2011, a little over a year before Shankar passed away.

Passion was also the impetus behind the exhibition itself. Everything on display belongs to Keigher, a Chicago native now living in Boston who's been producing Indian classical concerts and music programs for over 25 years. He was the world music buyer at Chicago's Tower Records and later the program coordinator for the city's Department of Cultural Affairs; he recently retired as artistic director of the World Music Institute. He also cofounded and curates Ragamala, an annual celebration of the music he so loves and the eighth edition of which took place on the exhibition's opening night.

"It's a love letter to Ravi and all that he's done," Keigher says about the exhibition. "To be able to bring Ravi's wife out and officially open it was a blessing, and [to] have her see things she's never [seen] before . . . It was really nice to be able to do it properly, and then do it in my hometown. And then be able to do it and really showcase what [the South Asia Institute cofounders] have built, with this new organization and new institution, which I think is very vital for Chicago . . . there's nothing like this in the city."

A focal point of the exhibition is one of Shankar's sitars, which was custom made for him and is featured in several of the photos on display—he even played it during some of his visits to the Chicago Symphony Center. The rest of the exhibition is composed of pictures, posters, advertisements, books, newspaper and magazine clippings, and albums, plus a large screen onto which footage of Shankar is continuously projected; all of these help illu-

minate the trajectory of the maestro's career, starting with his involvement as a child in his brother's touring dance troupe.

Of especial interest to museumgoers might be the ephemera surrounding Shankar's legacy as something of a pop-culture icon. As one placard declares, "Shankar was the only musician to perform at all three of the decade's most famous music festivals[:] Monterey International Pop Festival, Woodstock, and the Concert for Bangladesh." With the latter, "he helped create the modern day all-star benefit concert," intended, at the time, to raise awareness of the horrific famine then occurring in Bangladesh. This event grew out of his close friendship with Harrison, who also showed up to support the opening of Shankar's Kinnara School of Music in Los Angeles.

Shankar achieved a unique level of success—throughout the exhibition, his name is featured on posters with the likes of Jimi Hendrix, the Beach Boys, Janis Joplin, and the Grateful Dead (it's a who's who of famous musicians, including The Who)—and he capitalized on this to elevate other Indian musicians and even purveyors of other Indian art forms. Yet for helping to bring these figures to Western audiences, Shankar was sometimes criticized in his home country.

"He really was one of the first to kind of kick down the door," says Keigher. "But I love that he kicked down the door and tried to bring as many other Indian artists and art forms along with him as well. It says a lot about him as a character. Very giving and very humble in a lot of ways."

The sentiment of wanting to connect people, to each other and to other modes of creativity, is at the heart of the exhibition. "The main reason for choosing him was the fact that, here was a man 50 years ago building bridges between people through his music, very much similar to our mission here and what we want to do," says Shireen, "[building bridges] through art and music and literature . . . communicating our heritage."

On Saturday, February 19, at 4 PM, the South Asia Institute will host the final event connected to the exhibition, a virtual discussion between Chicago-based music writer Aaron Cohen and Oliver Craske, author of the exceedingly thorough biography on Shankar, *Indian Sun: The Life and Music of Ravi Shankar*. The exhibition runs through Saturday, March 5. The South Asia Institute is open Thursday through Saturday between 11 AM and 6 PM, with free admission every Friday. Tickets are available on the institute's website. 